



It was first down with 56 seconds left on the clock of the championship game at the Winnipeg High School Football League's CanadInns Bowl.

A win that night would end a 38-year victory drought for the St. John's Tigers.

We set up on defence as the Elmwood Giants offence huddled together for the play call from their coach on the sideline.

I was exhausted, but I showed no sign of weakness. There were teammates relying on my strength as I pursued the running back persistently to make important tackles.

With the enemy waiting for an opportunity to win, it was then I thought of how I had put myself in a situation to be successful and I was beaming with happiness.



Football forces you to react physically and mentally, so you need to be strong in both of those aspects of yourself. Football games were a test of not just physical strength but what we had been through emotionally, and the mental strength each player would get from testing themselves.

I found the championship game would be so important to win, that it would mean more than just accomplishing my personal goals and overcoming personal struggles to achieve the victory.

It would mean a victory for all the St. John's teams that had attempted all the years prior. It would even be a victory for a former St. John's Tiger who had recently passed away. I would be winning for all of them.



The mental aspect of football is your story of progress and how much you desire to win or achieve a goal. I find that I'm mentally strong because of what I have been through in life. I learned life skills by playing online games which was inspired by my older brother Kailless. My brother and dad were an inspiration for football, and I always gave my best in whatever was occupying my time.

With football, I found deeper meaning in working out and hitting. I found character building routines and traits I would pick up, even ways to embellish my leadership abilities and fulfil my love to compete, a means of boosting my mental and physical health.

The physicality of football is an escape for me. When I'm frustrated or angry over something, I can directly relate my stress relief to football. For example, when I lost my best friend two years ago I couldn't believe it and I grew angry over my inability to find any way of helping from across North America

These ways nurtured my young self into becoming prepared for the world ahead and into becoming a better person.

Online gaming was where I found my leadership abilities. First it was an escape that I had seen my brother use when he wasn't in school. I could hear him gaming out in the other room and I wanted to have fun like that so when I got my own computer, discovering and learning the internet was difficult but I delved into it because it had no limits to my learning.

I found friends online, although my dad was distrustful when I talked about meeting them. My brother told me to learn from them, to be careful and to think about the future. With these friends online we began playing games and in some games you are required to make big decisions. My friends regularly looked to me to make them. I didn't understand the pressure and it frustrated me but when I asked Kailless, he told me it came to quick decision-making. I always seemed to think out a solution and so my friends trusted me to be a leader and make quick decisions. My dad called it being a man.

I always look up to my brother because he has such a logistical way of looking at life. When it comes down to stressful moments, I can think of what he'd say to me and come up with a solution. Taking this way of thinking to football, I can be a competitive menace with logistics and probability. Studying film and training hard as well as being a natural leader on the field can all be attributed to my brother pushing me to use my head.



I knew not to trust people on the internet and to be wary. But I did come across people around my age who I had the most fun with or learned to trust. I added to my friends list on Skype — an application used to call anywhere in the world. “Pvtbuddy1214” or Adam Jesse Bosch was my age, just three months younger than me so we made instant friends. We started playing more and more after school and into the evening.

Adam and I began a friendship online at a young age of 11. At the time I lived in North Battleford, Sask. “Buddy” lived in Bloomington, Calif., on the other side of North America! We shared stories and experiences over Skype as though the distance didn't matter. We laughed and played games while we did our homework and talked about girls, football and so much more about our lives.

Adam and I had always talked about meeting up as a fantasy since the distance between us had been a plateau and we knew it. But one morning my mom surprised me with a birthday gift that I'd always remember. She told me for my 13th birthday, she was taking my brother, grandma and I to California for our vacation!

After the long drive we arrived in Los Angeles. It was a beautiful city like I had never seen before but that didn't distract me from the reason I went there.

Meeting Adam was a dream come true and everything we had hoped for. I knew what he looked like but it was surreal! We went to an amusement park for an evening then had a beach fire to end it all. It was constant jokes and laughter between us. It was sad to say goodbye when that time came but we kept laughing as we drove away.



Whilst I endeavoured into the internet I learned more and matured. I found more funny things said online by people I liked than what my classmates had to say. My humour didn't match theirs so I stuck out when I made jokes they didn't get. Or myself not laughing at the jokes they made. So I felt I didn't relate to them like I did with my online friends but that didn't stop me from being teased by the other kids for being ugly or boring.

I would tell my father and Kailless about this and they would only encourage me to ignore them and just be humbly smarter than them. I learned not to say much to my classmates when I would be teased or made fun of. Although the words they would say hurt me I grew resilient but still frustrated and I took to eating more as comfort from the bullying. I gained weight quickly which only made me more susceptible to teasing, frustrated and upset with my image.

I didn't talk much at home, either alone in my room to my online friends and so my family said I needed a way to relieve that stress and to become strong.

My dad knew a way.

The physical aspect of football comes into playing with will and hard work. I began when I was young and was determined to lose weight and be more athletic for my own health.

After school days and later into the evenings, dad would call me out to the backyard after I had played games and have me run receiver routes, and small circuit workouts he'd arrange for me. I didn't like being away from the computer since I always felt comfortable playing games. I felt uncomfortable but I started to feel better about myself by working out and being fit.



I soon outgrew the yard and needed more room to run. My dad began taking me to the Battleford Minor Football team for practice. I had no idea what I was doing but my brother played for the varsity team at the North Battleford Comprehensive High School so I stuck with it. It had to be fun if even my brother found it fun. I began playing as a defensive end and worked on my fundamental skills.



As time went on and I grew older I understood my mom and dad loved each other but they were not meant for each other. My mom informed me of this and said my dad was going to move away as they could no longer be hurtful to one another. This wasn't the first time I had gone without my dad in my life but now it felt more real. I knew the whole truth wasn't my business and it was sugar coated but it was all I needed to know.

Mom drove Kailless, dad and I to the bus station where he gave me a long hug. While he was holding me he told me that I should never be afraid of what I can and can't do, just be myself for no one can be as cool and smart as me, that I was a leader not a follower.

These were monumental words to be told at that age and so they stuck with me. I stayed with football and began developing myself. I wanted to be all that my dad said I could be and was. Football became more important to me as it was something we did together before he left. It was a constant reminder of him and the role he played in my life. Although he wasn't in the picture anymore I paid tribute in a way by doing what he and I shared and loved.

As Adam started high school, I too had to start, but elsewhere. I started school at St. John's High School where I met Grant McMillan, the coach of the football team and began a new life. I felt a new beginning at this school, by being more social and making the best out of the high school experience.

I wanted to be a Tiger.

Adam and I drifted apart but still texted frequently. He too began being more focused on life but he told me high school has started being more difficult. He got involved with a gang fight that led him to being affiliated with a gang. It was a complete contrast between us and I felt as though we may have really lost our connection because I didn't endorse what he was doing.

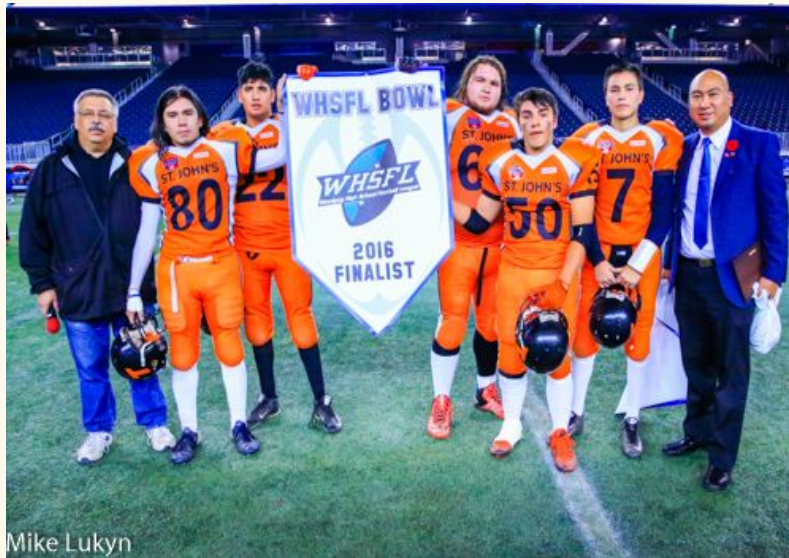
I soon learned that I can invest my time into football like I did games on the computer. I had attained leadership skills playing on a competitive team with Counter-Strike and I could transfer that onto the football field and it would turn out to be beneficial to me, my coaches and my teammates.

I was vocal and communicative at middle linebacker. I found ways of getting my football fix by being mentally prepared for the football games. I could share things with my teammates before the play when I recognized a formation.

Although in my rookie season I wasn't quite skilled enough to play in the game itself I watched as Tigers seniors fought hard to try and win against the East Kildonan Reivers in the 2016 CanadInns Bowl. We came short in points and it seemed as though we just needed more time. This loss really taught me how sometimes life will just win and it's how you strive to win and recover after a loss.

Seeing the emotions in the veterans and other players, it meant so much to all of us and we lost it after working hard. A few seniors from the team including Jordan Thomas, our quarterback discussed with me about trying to bring a championship home to St. John's with all my might. I promised and agreed to give my all to supporting the team.

It was set in motion then what had to be done.



Although my mind was set on making myself better and I was motivated, I was given another loss — one I had no say in.

On Jan. 14, 2017, Adam Bosch, my online friend, was stabbed to death in a Bloomington theatre.

My online friends had attempted to contact me the night before and when I woke up and read a few lines about Adam, I immediately tried contacting them but to no answer. I investigated in a panic and to my horror what they said was true and my heart broke in more ways than I could imagine.

It pained me mentally for months. I could no longer be open with myself as the one person in the world I wanted to tell everything to was taken from me. The feeling was hard to pinpoint, I didn't know how to respond or react appropriately to conversation and I felt secluded.

This has to be my biggest recovery and lesson learned yet. When facing this, I had support and love in my environment, but I couldn't feel it. I was numbed by the loss and struggled to feel emotion again.

This brings me back to the championship game, when I really felt star struck on the Investors Group Field with how meaningful the position was that I was in.

It was third down and the Tigers defence was countering the Giants offence yet again. Senior safety Asher Wood batted the ball down before a pass could be completed and forced a turnover on downs.

The 2018 Tigers offence ran out for the last time and kept me in the victory formation, as our quarterback snapped the ball and took the knee to end the game in our favour to win.

There was a moment of silence across the line of scrimmage as everyone stood up slowly.

It was almost like a shock wave of emotion as the crowd cheered and the sound reached us. We all snapped out of a daze and bolted to the bench joyfully to join the rest of our team jubilating in our win. We had a celebration in mind to end the game so the team gathered on our sideline quickly. I stood in front as we sang “We are the Tigers” — a song we sang after every win on the bus ride back from game.



It was my proudest moment as a Tiger. I had brought home a championship after a 38-year drought and fulfilled a promise to Jordan who couldn't live to see it himself. I had overcome the biggest challenge yet in life. All the things I had faced seemed minuscule in comparison. I felt as though whatever life could throw at me, I would find a way out with a constant reassurance in myself and my abilities.





The cold game didn't seem to affect my adrenaline and pure happiness running through my veins. Once the fans had left and most of the remaining players had hurried back into the locker room to warm up; Matthew Proulx, Grant McMillan, Myles Kakewash and I laid in the snow and let it fall on us, with the championship trophy and smiles planted across our faces. We were just giggling and talking about how this has to be the best day ever. We had to let it all sink in and just ride out the rollercoaster of emotions.



We gathered in the locker room for celebrations and before we left I had to step away for a moment of clarity and silence as the bus ride back had to be full of joy and laughing. I needed to let out anguish and sorrow from the battle played previously and so I wept for my dear friend. I knew for the rest of my life my dear friend would live in me and I'd live for him and for moments like these I would cherish them, every minute of it.

It was that I'd owe him and pay him back for all the happy memories and joyful times he shared with me. I felt his love with me that day and a surge of emotions come back to me as I found myself again with pride and a new found reason to live my life to the fullest - even with a few losses along the way.